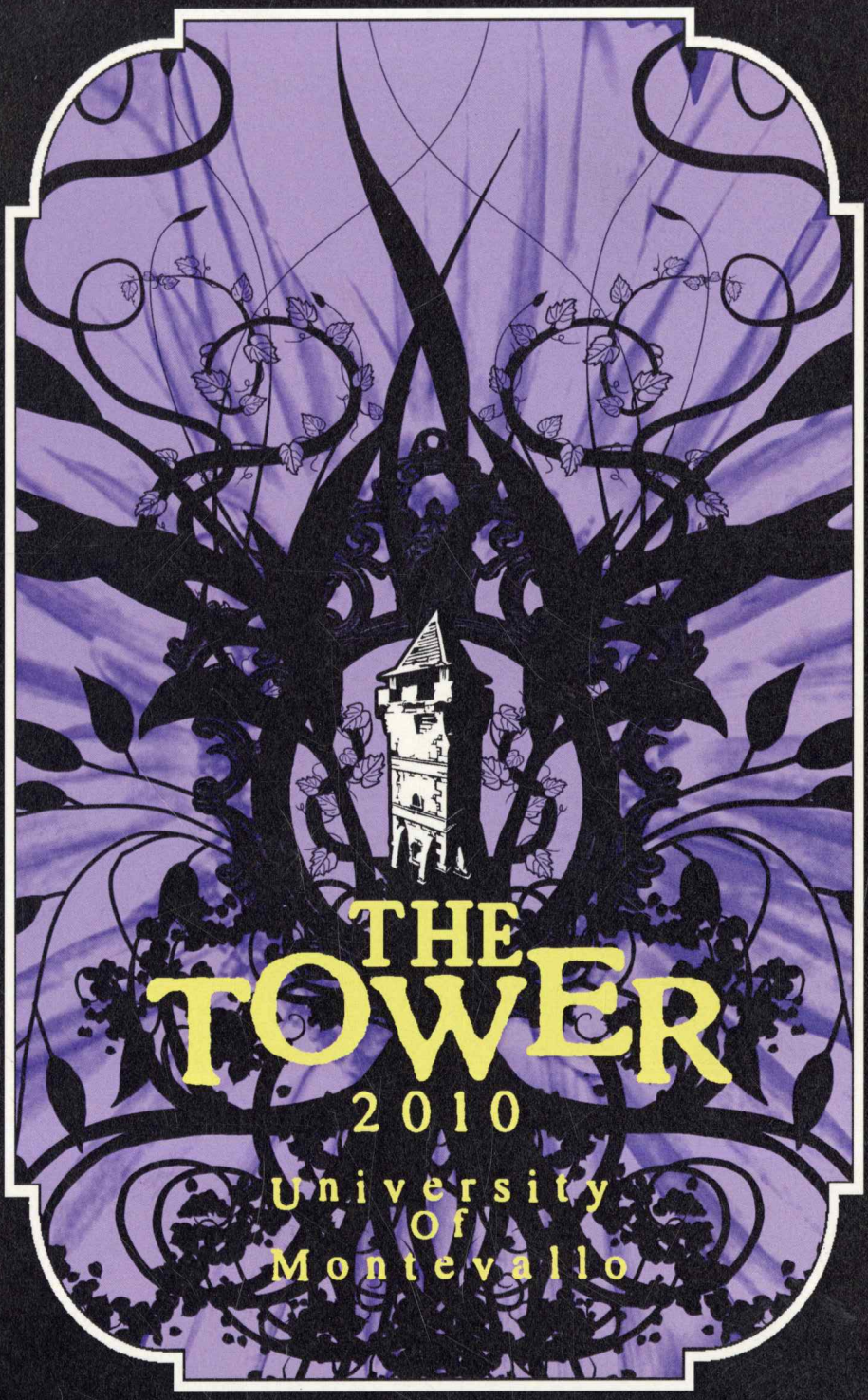
THE
TOWER
2010
University
Of
Montevallo

## Message from Editor

I would like to offer a special thanks to all of those eager to become involved in the production of this year's Tower magazine. Yes, this includes the names on the following page. A special thanks should be extended also to Jim Murphy, the faculty advisor, as well as everyone working in the University of Montevallo's Public Relations Department.

# The Tower 2010

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# POETRY


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## Dennis Cain

***by Courtney Bennett***

I was with my grandfather
and we visited his apartment.
He was watching the Weather Channel with the subtitles on.

And he said,
"You in seventh grade?
Seventh grade was a hard year for me--
so hard, in fact, that I dropped out."

And he said,
"Peggy always brings me chocolate, but she doesn't know
that it gives me heartburn."

So he gave me a chocolate éclair,
wrapped in foil
decorated with his sugary fingerprints,
and I took it without planning to eat it.
I never did--
it was still sitting in my grandparents' refrigerator
on the day I went to his funeral.

At the visitation, I saw my great-great uncle's dead body.
He was cold and quiet, but I was still afraid
that he would open his eyes
and look at me
and ask me
why I didn't eat his éclair.
The big knots all over his neck
were no longer warm.
His hands were still gnarled,
now stiff at the knuckles.

Uncle Dennis--
I must admit,
you annoyed me terribly when I saw you in the grocery store
and you yelled,
not because you were mad,
but because a fever destroyed your ears
years and years before I was a twinkle in my daddy's eye.
If I could see you now
with grown-up eyes,

I would talk slowly
and you would read my lips.
I would apologize for the éclair
that I hid in the trash out of guilt.
And then you would let slip
all those little secrets
everyone's dying to know.

• • •

## My Howl is the Dog's Howl

*by Courtney Bennett*

When I walk these trails it is not me--
no, it is my foremothers, my forebrothers,
and the woodsmoke fills my lungs,
flesh borrowed from other flesh, leaf, swine, grain, fowl.

My howl is the dog's howl--
my call is the same as the chitterchattering cicada,
screeching tires as they unstick from greedy asphalt,
the whispering of leaves shifting and crumbling underfoot.

And you are there too--
You are the distant murmur of the carnival crowd;
your music is that of the earthquake, the headache,
the relentless thudding of the heart.

We blend and meld together--
we are one. Our dew is of the riverbed,
exponentially growing, unseen droplets
invisible in the spoken words of the living and the dead.

The lights in our eyes we share with the sunset--
burn our bodies and we will rise and be everywhere,
oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus.

And it is the fission, fusion that baptize us in atoms--
fireflies bobbing lazily on the breeze,
a twinkle in the sleepywarm sunlight and we're gone.

## Pushing Up Goldenrods

*by Courtney Bennett*

my grandmother's great-grandma
on her mama's mama's side
was gonna marry a Confederate soldier.
he had a wedding ring made for her
from a shiny gold coin.

when she was eighteen
and he was still a boy
he marched from his home to
godknowswhere
and never came back.

well, my grandmother doesn't even know his name--
Sherman burnt my family records anyhow.
now there's nobody to ask
about the Alabama gentleman in gray
with the cardboard-soled boots
that marched him to a dead future.

when he fell in some battle--
an arrow in his chest,
a bayonet in his back,
a rat in his belly,
a bullet in his head--
a whole family died.

now in our Unified nation
I am free to reexamine history.
I can look at photographs of dead Rebels and think,
was that him?
rigormortis arms, pipecleaner legs,
strange gaunt faces with glass eyes and slack jaws
stare back at me--
electronic dots in shades of gray, blue, black, white.

if he had come home,
I would have been born to a family of strangers.
instead, the ring sits in a forgotten drawer
belonging to his would-be great-granddaughter
who doesn't even know his name.

## Fickle Celled Anemia

*by Garrett Crosby*

This fickle intent's
cell, sickled, and spent.
Your cane crutch, your cold touch;
I'm ripped through and rent.

Your tickle's intense;
sold, cycled, and cents.
These veins crushed, my cheeks flushed;
You stripped down and vent.

ANEMIC! ANEMIC!
Claw hard for my blood.
My red's gone a missing;
But you are a flood.

Your flood's quite impulsive;
submerged in blond snow.
I'm beaming, compulsive;
with caution...I glow.

Anew trick! I knew tricks!
you taught the old dog.
My grin is now too thick,
with prudence spanned fog.

Our sentiments trickle;
indignant, yet trifle.
Our mouth words are fickle;
malignant, yet stifled.

You're boundlessly patient,
with blind incoherence.
So please be my patient,
I'll gift perseverance.

## Salted

*by Garrett Crosby*

It's raining salt; fresh grit damp air:
the soggy grain mounds sweat white winter flares.
And crystalline, they spit back light,
and mock your diamonds burning bright.
When stars gentle pricks do pierce through black veil,
your wide eyes do welcome, your stretched skin is pale.
The street sings with moisture when met with your step,
my breath, it condenses, sweet beads on your neck;
Your hands unfamiliar, warm gloves hold chapped hands,
the salt is electric, white desert, bright sands.

• • •

## Flinted

*by Garrett Crosby*

When tactual words do graze on skin,
my red stream is bubbling and cheeks stretched to grin.
With time found twine which groped a tree,
scaled,swung,soared: fragile skin, bony knees.
Your rippled green eyes sparked haste in my cause,
and bright ivory teeth blocked mind from its flaws.
Our quiet roots will reach to warm,
we're shrouded in soot, slow wade on the shore.
Your dampening hair spread moss on my lap,
beached wail, bleached sail and tasty mouth sap.
We sank through the flint, thighs caked with clay:
My mind was flooded, wet woods, peaceful day.

## Wintress Mile

*by Garrett Crosby*

When Winter's smile becomes a grin,
the vacant woods do welcome.
The frightened brush that peels away,
provides us room for roaming.

I close my eyes to get the most;
harsh wind, transparent clothing.
Don't perch upon the sparkling bluff;
the ice should be a warning.

As leaves discard, the quilts arrive;
a cloak, a means for loving.
Weaving, locking, digit twine;
provides us room to grow in.

I close my eyes to get the most;
soft head and hands on shoulder.
Please perch your head, upon mine;
my furnace cheeks will glow.

Your Winter smile, it makes me beam;
I hope my words will welcome.
Your swallows' sound, my heart it pounds;
with bodies...sing a chorus.

## A Constant Race

*by Abbey Davis*

I've been told that the only thing
I do with any kind of consistency
is leave, but I mean,
it's not my fault.
I've always been this way.
When I was a kid,
I ran away from home
more times than I can count.
Eleven years old, hunched over
against the interstate wind,
backpack full of stuffed animals,
until the cops finally found me
and took me back to parents
who couldn't manage to explain
why their kid was so unhappy
except good old genetics.
And once that proved fruitless,
I started validating my existence
by how many miles
I could run in one day,
adding another one on
every few weeks or so,
until my foot gave out
and I spent six months limping around
on crutches and wheel chairs,
barely able to walk.

I ran out of ways
to run physically,
so I started leaving
proverbially instead.
I can never stick around
for too long.
I'm too busy grave digging
old failures and mistakes
to fall anywhere.
You'll be six feet under
and I'll be on the ground,
peering in at what I see
as only a coffin.
I always convince myself
that this time it'll be different,
that I can make myself stay,
but as soon as I start falling,
I immediately grasp
for the air above me,
and the moment I hit the ground,
I take off running,
far too fast for you
to catch up with,
because there's nothing better
than leaving, unless
you're leaving something behind.

## Asphalt Blues
*By Jeremy Dunn*

My greatest fear
is that in the depths of my being
can be found no wilderness at all,
as I would like to think,
but instead a flat parking lot
striped with painted lines—
an open desolation
scorched and stinking in the summer sun,
heat waves rising off
and burning the sky.

A place where beneath the asphalt
nutrient deprived soil suffocates
as paved area, ever increasing,
oozes over the earth,
smothering its fecundity.

Insatiable, the asphalt moves
and cuts little mazes
anywhere it can find,
creeping like a disciple
to the thresholds of the super-marts
that give it power.

A sea of black and gray
punctuated by little sticky ponds
of high fructose corn syrup,
its militia of cigarette butts
and forsaken wrappers
growing ever larger.

• • •

## A Copy of Silas Marner
*By Matthew Goethe*

The jagged words we put in
arches of our feet
trade for the blue-limbed
jungle canopy of the car
you were born under
not our words
not our bodies

surely the archdiocese
will stop holding raffles
for gilded baby's fingers

watch your image rise in hollow
lung balcony of
nine women who buried themselves
in a bowl of rusted jelly beans
beggars spit their teeth in
how will they die?
exposure?

who rent himself with a jagged board
brain matter strung on clothes lines
beaten the breath out of
like the word you could
only say in your sleep
something with an f and s

you would trade us for words
our words
whining about death like
rubber snakes
regime's hat
caught in racimes
the period actually a decimal
courting windings in nunneries

I understood love
only like an old bicycle
two wheels spinning
some old whitewashed wind

but with what jagged board did
you cleave the first?

fabric too brittle for wind
becomes wind

there are fat-laced soaps
and hot and cold water
an eyeline we must walk along
until we can no longer be seen

burial knocks at the door
when we pardon it
wants to know if it can look at our magazines

## Afterword
*by Matthew Goethe*

Barge they hung from god's neck
nibbles baritone spickets
in-spouts the brittle mouth
that boy called your heart
first fencepost
swilled pecan shells
in water cold davenport

grandmother kneel:
a collarbone and your yoke

grandfather kneel:
a man only cries bottles with
nothing inside

penance pries an old bugle,
silver, officious prelate
tasting the weather of raw crayfish

exposure is ever-dental,
evidential
when balled like black stockings:

wind hanging from god's neck
like gods,
war species' circles
shredded into metallic hairstrands

sunken bridge of the nose
drillbit that is your estuary

all reconciles a disease called
cosmos
darkening in the sun

darken a prayer like beetroot

an get what you

room made of doors
will always turn
side ways

blasphemy is a thief who
holds his boyhood pains
in the corpses of his thumbs

corpse tilts a bucket of jaundiced
cherries and drinks them
into a sun

charred fecal nail
delineates aviary stream's
avatar: volition

Parnassus shawls and tells a clay
ribbon with no bottom

axle of revelation
casting long shadow
always back, doubling

double back

an get what you

three minnows petrify into a
curtain and
sleeve a docile farewell

grandmother

not among buttons pressed
mantleward
by inscrutable eyetanks

deaspect the quarry limbed in
volume of a beggar's tree

saw the breakwater into
an amphibious saddle
bilious deployment
shrieks a window sticky
with apple juice pall

suture projects a fin
that is Mars' left lung
hanging low in the sky

it looks green even to those who know
better

what virgin mallets
sleep beneath their own husks

calling a telephone
meant to be an arm
table kneeling over a crater

an get what you

grandfather
grandmother

horse skull was a house
a willow put a knife to

as a dove's tail

bog became a yellow wall
after I turned to it
as a lover

burned blackberries breathed
        as nipples
I covered the bowel
        of cilia's scratch paper

Give it a name
full of anger
a horse's name
anagrammed

## Choir:/Property Line

***by Matthew Goethe***

rye bones ribbon
buttons whitened coal treble
vestiture burnt cup memoir of razor

only one waitress left at Victory Junction
and she has gold leaf spilling like cough medicine
from a tiny room in her side:
re-belling black cormorant jut

wind carving in-versed cave

saints grill her days as margins

hauntless revivalisms bear overcrowded into her skins
equinization made cloister breathing

jasper cattle run down that hill
we are embodied usury

spindle revalve widens sharpened rivers
acorn pluck acrobatic fingers visionable
because of clouds

lean mailbox
rutted beds ridden
for dispelled misspellings

## Silver Changes Hands

*by Matthew Goethe*

antiphon and reichstag
dug out a cradle in the floor
of their new apartment
filled it with hay

dripped blue quill fever labor
headstone of heaven

vortex of arms waving
kneading the ocean's
carbines yodeling outside
seasons

foredawned curve marked their pillows
skull-encased millstone
bed as metaphor
phosphorescent scene of
a station east of here
out of earshot

industry is the bulging of
words' mouths

man drawn into a brown-eyed voice
leaves a cotton fire to its barn

throws himself at a windshield
sticks gum on antiphon's
underarm
finger pressed in blind
utricle of reichstag's chest

bread crumbs weep
per spire rant
resting in lion's white mane

table settings become breasts
for us to sleep at
teeth carved cathedral ceilings
in mouths

this is where war comes in
to show his home movies:
his little girl doing
rhythmic gymnastics
his father slow drifting to
the bottom of the sea
through his wonder at what 'he'
will bring him back

after he leaves
they decide to lathe
an image, a body
but this changes
it is none of their business

## In Search of Wilderness

*by Madison P. Jones IV*

We walked as pilgrims
One cold spring morning.
Trading sun and sand
With their bouncing blondes
For this uncertain freezing mist
On Talladega's Dugger Mountain.

We marched as soldiers
Through that once holy land;
The great Pinhoti[1] of Creek Indian.
Their Hallowed hunting ground reduced
To unmanned recreational wilderness.

The sacred chanting now replaced
By clamor of heavy white feet.
The howl of wolf and lion drowned
By clangor of busy machinery.

So camped our final night, we lie
Bathed with icy moonlit glow
In Cheaha's still and silent air.

A noise appears severe and strange
Some ancient false resound.
A distant drum and feet and chant
Still howls across the night.

[1]Pinhoti is a Creek Indian word meaning "turkey home". The Pinhotti trail runs from Alabama to Georgia in what is now known as the Talladega National Forest.

## The Sojourner, or To My Brother

*by Madison P. Jones IV*

Though I barely knew you
I have spent much time searching

deep in the hills,
across rivers—
in morning bus terminals.

Once I looked for you for three days
in the Denver Airport,
scanning blank faces
for a small trace of you.

You were only my half brother,
or so my parents remind me.
I really only met you five—
maybe six times total.

But even still I thought of you often.
Crouched in torn blue jeans,
torn tie-dye—lotus style.

and I met a lot of people like you,
even combined them with your image,
so we could still hang out.
That being said we hung out often—

and never.
And how I resent that—
and you for not visiting,
and parents for not allowing visits.

Maybe then I wouldn't have tried so hard
to be like you—to be you.
Blue jeans never felt quite right on me.

I was glad when I saw your body in the casket.
Glad that it didn't look like you.
Fresh clean shave, short haircut—
rubber skin that still couldn't hide the scars
of your drunken car crash in Vermont.

Glad that it wasn't you,
as my lips kissed your rubbery forehead

## Driving

***by Brittany Smith***

A quarter of a tank won't take you anywhere,
but you keep pushing it past eighty going
southwest on the interstate leading
to nowhere in particular.

I've always loathed you for being so rash.
Did you see--
the sun setting on the horizon?

Doubtless you saw the fiery glimmers
in your sideview mirros, glanced over at
the radio face and turned up to volume
before the myriad hues of golden clouds
made you consider anything beyond your
five senses.

Stop driving so damn fast--
get your foot off the gas and pull the car over.

You've still got enough fuel left to turn around,
head back to where you started,
and open your eyes.

You can be back before, dawn, you know--
and she'll be there waiting, wearing her
heart on her sleeve and rejoicing vividly
over your safe return.

You're pushing it past 90 now,
Driving southwest to nowhere in particular.

Doubtless you're loathing the setting sun
for what it forces you to consider between
lyrical intrusions and insomatic weeps
of the engine that's being pushed too hard.

She understands you more than you'll ever know.

When dawn arrives, it will all be over.
I'm sure you'll manage to fuel up
and keep driving by then--
and she'll eventually stop staring at the door.

The light will spill through the blinds on her window,
and she'll love you quite ardently--

Regardless of the fact that you're driving--
driving way too fast and more recklessly by the minute.

Regret your departure or not,
I wish you would consider the setting of the sun.

• • •

## The Importance of War

***by Brittany Smith***

There ain't nothing to life that demands more attention than war, boy"... My father's gruff voice pierced into my thoughts as we all gathered in the living room near the fire drawing in what warmth we could into the spacious room. He was addressing me, again. I suppose he was referring to me either joining the army when I turned eighteen in the spring, or was again, insinuating how I was to be the man of my own house one day. But I really didn't take his words in at the moment. They resonated in their monotonous stealth in the background of the room near the iced-over windows.

I couldn't help but notice the fire. Its sharp flickers combined with its intense heat made me consider more warm, more heated things in relation to me. My mother, too, was glaring in the direction of the flames. Whether to escape the robust, grizzly barking of my father's voice that she, faithfully, had bestowed for the past twenty-one years or to drown out the other cares of the day I didn't know. Maybe she saw that flicker in the fire, too, and old dreams began to resurface in the heat of the blaze. Maybe she was warm enough to contemplate what she yearned for, what she had always wanted to achieve... Maybe she was even planning, in her silent nature, to take these dreams off the back-burner and chase them after so long having let them resonate somewhere behind her in her life.

Who knew what was running through her eyes, her mind. All I knew was that she saw something in the flickers, and I did too: a strength that wasn't contained in my father's lofty voice or even contained elsewhere in the room-- in the house. A timeless Variable that had nothing to do with money, years, or the decreasing economy-- but everything to do with wars.

Not the wars my father was barking about but something else--
the obscure, scratching feeling one gets in the wakes of the night,
the hunger that has flailing arms and reaches through your spirit
grabbing for something within itself to be consumed with. I mean,
the kind of war that you win eternally, if you find the right path. It
was there, in the fire.

I may be seventeen years old and my father's potential pawn, but I saw things within the fire that I don't see in the living room every night (or any nights prior to this one). Maybe my mother saw the war, too. Maybe we'd both find the everlasting answer. But until then, I'm seventeen and my father's grizzly and robust voice is monotonously barking about being a man, the disheveled economy and the annoyance of people who don't pay their taxes while my mom stares on blinking as though intrigued by something extraordinary. Yea, she sees it too. If only my father knew the importance of war.

• • •

## Summertime

***by Lauren Stover***

I fell and it hurt
my pride mostly,
the rain left my skin as prey for mosquitoes
my shoe soles defenseless to the muddy sidewalk
and I laid there fallen, not broken
to watch the fireflies.

Many years have passed, decades even
but there was a time when I would fall on purpose.
My sisters and I would watch from the shade as my brothers picked the cotton fields.
When the sun would dim and start to set
we would leave the shade knowing
that in the Georgia summertime
we had hours of daylight left.
Fireflies would swarm the crops
That covered acres of land, as far as we could see.
This land was life, earth, the world, happiness, to us.
All we could see

all the knowledge we had,
all that was.
And the greens and blues, beiges and taupe
blended when we crossed our eyes,
as children do.

The sky was blue as my brother's eyes.
His eyes were always beautiful,
filled with a lifetime of secrets.
All the girls noticed.
And on the day of his mourning,
we remembered him for those eyes.
But when the fireflies came out,
we were free from the treacherous heat that kept us,
prisoners in the shade.
The fields lit up like Frances Farmer's dress,
blue and beige and taupe with greens.
It sparkled and clung to her hips
revealing a curvy, matured body.
A body I dreamed of one day having.

And I did.
And I wore dresses like hers.
And the Freds and Joes of the world fumbled and stuttered and
were fools over me.
I developed bosoms and tanned legs,
with dark, thick hair that fell to my shoulders.
I laughed and I smiled in heels and fine jewelry,
was pursued for marriage on several occasions,
was taken to dances and awarded for my beauty.

Why, Frances Farmer would have gazed at pictures of me,
as I did to her pictures,
and as a girl she would have said, "I hope to one day be a woman
like her."

But before that time, I admired the colors and captured the
sparkling fireflies,
like the sparkles in her dresses,
and kept them in a jar my daddy gave to me.
And as I caught them I would throw myself,
as if tackling in a football game
and fall to make my audience laugh.

I no longer choose to fall.
My bones don't break but ache as if broken.
My thinned blood swells,
black and blue,
covering each limb enough to become sleeves and pants.
I think if I fall once more, I might have no use for clothing.
For days I cannot move;
I want to cut away the bone.
My legs stay bandaged and so I hide.

But at one time they were ravishing and easily healed.
I wore sheer stockings over them,
beige, it was only appropriate.
But they were sheer enough for all to see.
My patients in the war noticed how nice they were;
my patients were all male.
I did not notice these patients, though.
A cute red head caught my eye.
He fought and played, and loved my legs the most.
So I would attend his matches with a date,
to keep him on his toes.
He would win those matches,
in the spirit of jealousy,
then in the hospital he would say,
"Barbara, one day I'll make you mine."

And he did,
this red head and his stethoscope
with eyes like fireflies.
Moved me to Alabama to make his babies,
seven in all,
with curls on their heads
together in beiges and taupe,
the youngest in blue.
One patient we could not heal, and so our seven became six.
But I was able to give him two namesakes.
My redheaded Elvis,
handsome and charming in his pink Cadillac,
was satisfied as he drove off into that night.
And so the suited man arrived at my door
too late in the night
for a visitor holding a hat to his chest.
Another patient I could not heal.
I do not choose to fall.

## I Was a Child

*by Ethan Taylor*

I was time
I was pictures and I was poetry
I was a pond and the fish that swim in it
Evolving to breathe soiled air

I was coffee and I was tea
I was the sunshine on your face in the morning
I was a balloon
Held down by a five year old
I slipped away, floated to the heavens
And faded from his eyes

I was flowers on the table
Waiting to be walked in on
I was my grandfather's mustache
Tickling my mother's cheek as she was tucked into bed
I was a playground
I was the monkey bars, the swing set, and the slides

I was a raindrop
I was an ocean
I was tall buildings and the sky that they scraped
I was the orange in a sunset, the warmth in your heart
Leaking out to cover the globe

I was a bicycle
I was the first ride without training wheels
I was Christmas lights
I was a glowing city at night
I was a bunk bed
I was a rooftop
I was shared by two brothers
I was a little boy who wished to one day be as big as his father
I now only wish to be as great as him

# ART

**Brandy Bajalia**
Composure
Figure Study #1
Figure Study #2

**Lee Beaver**
Evolution, Cute and Cuddly

**Rosie Conway Maguire**
Untitled

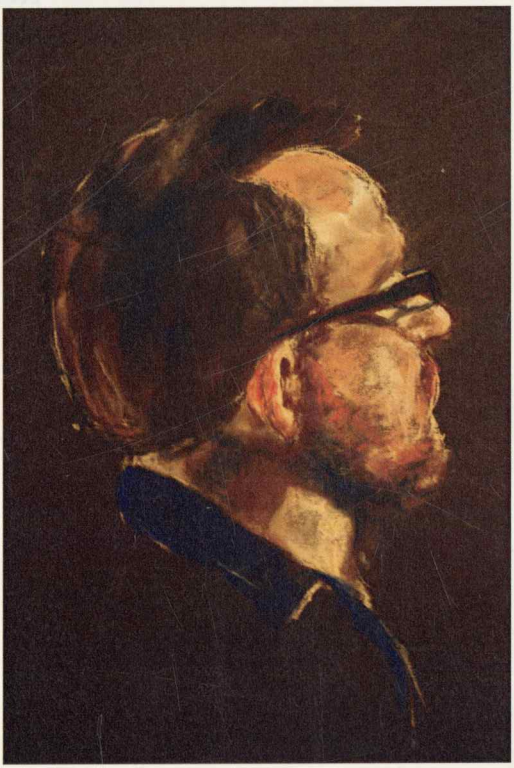
**Sarah Dunn**
Regret

**Rebecca Munkachy**
Fastfood

**Jennifer Woodbery**
Color
Untitled

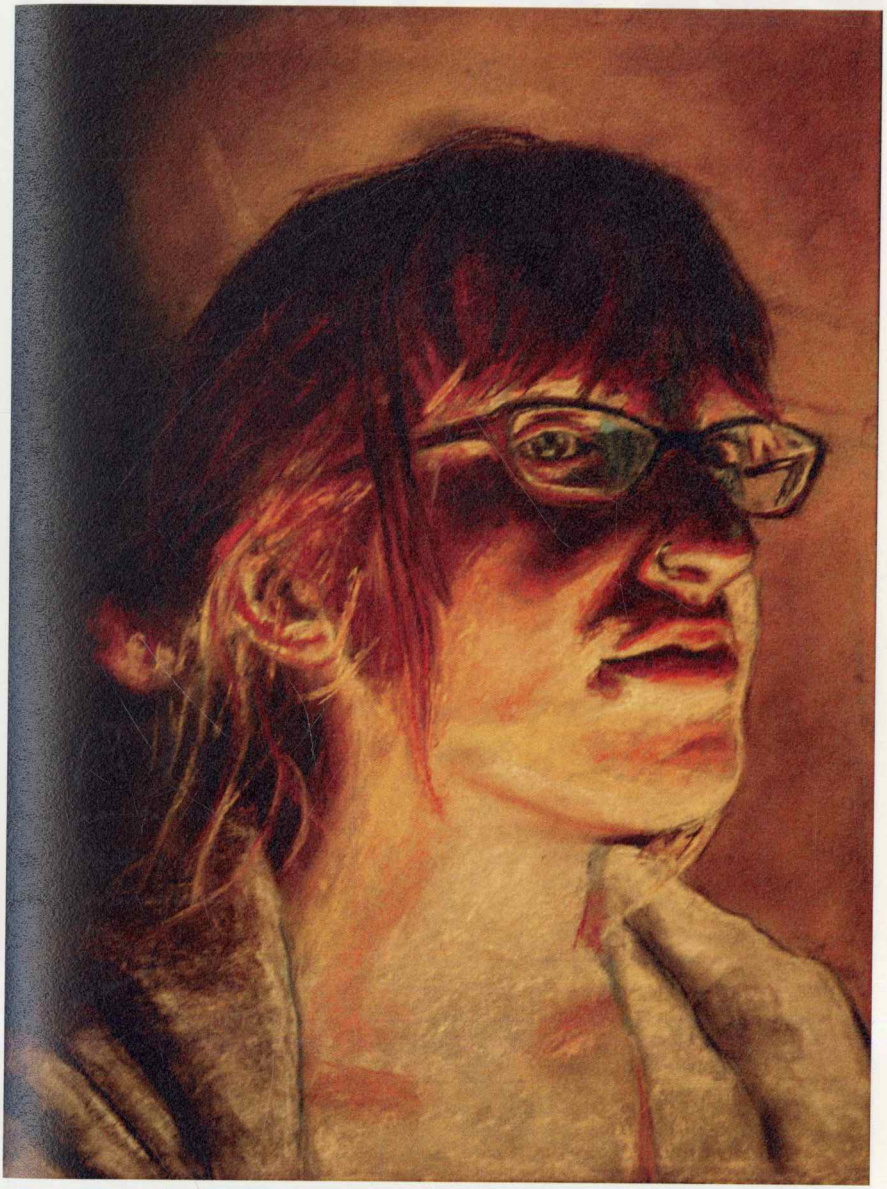
## Brandy Bajalia

"Composure"



"Figure Study #1"

"Figure Study #2"



**Lee Beaver**

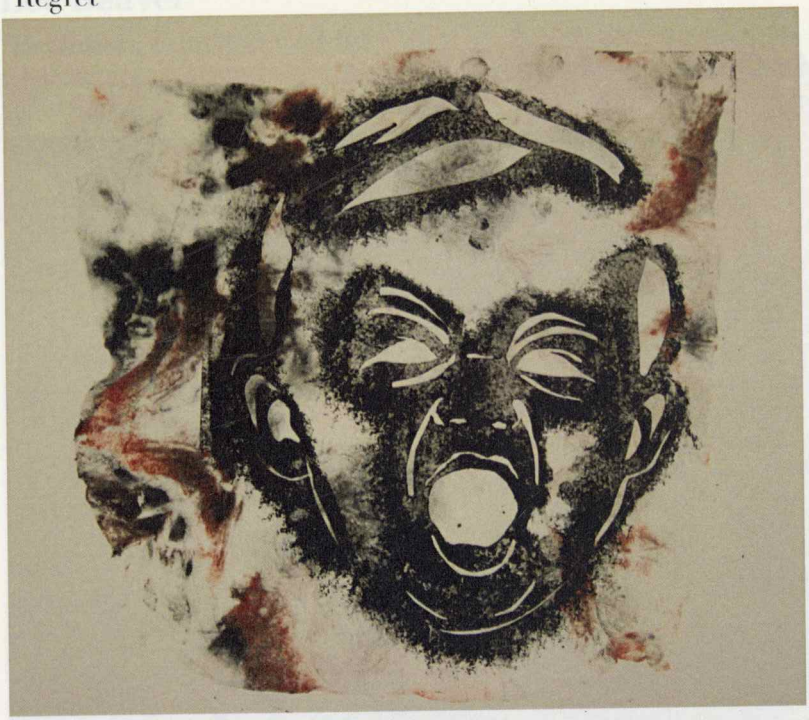
"Evolution, Cute and Cuddly"

## Rosie Conway-Maguire

Untitled.

## Sarah Dunn

"Regret"



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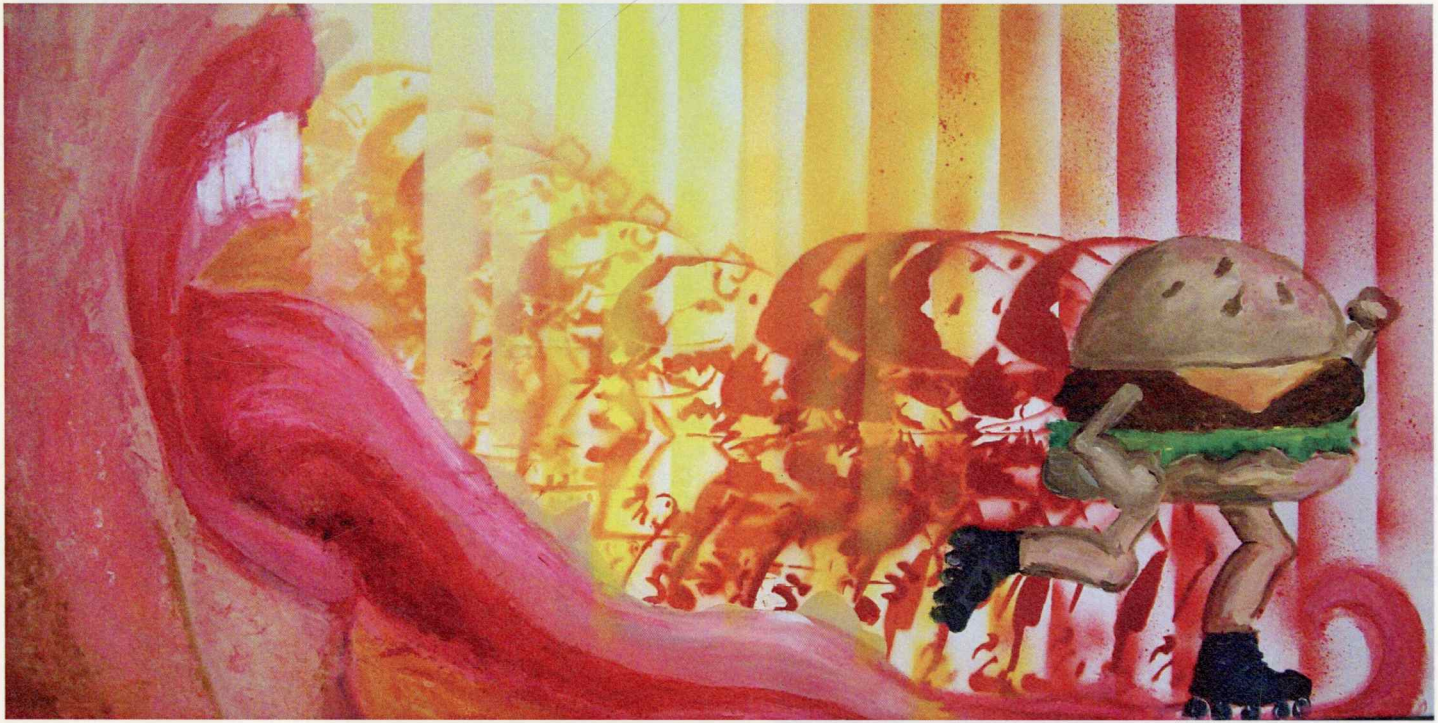
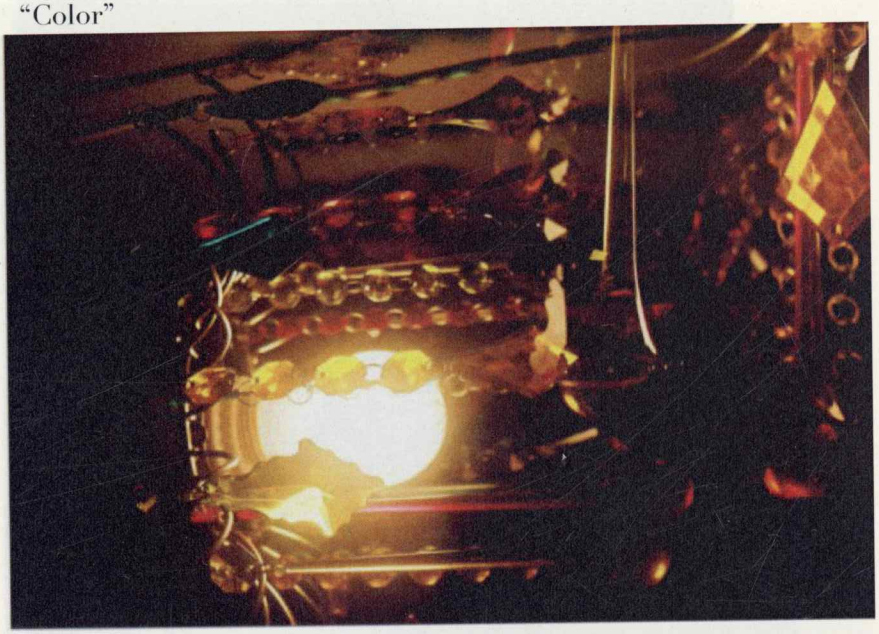
## Rebecca Munkachy

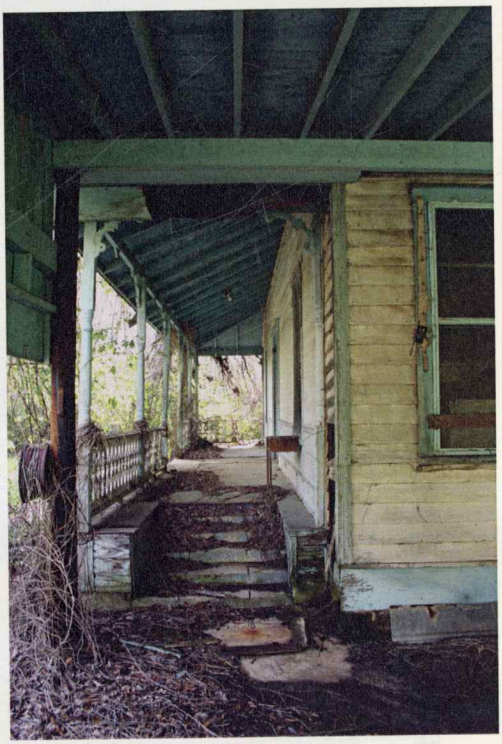
"FastFood"



## Jennifer Woodbery

"Color"





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# PROSE

***The Cyclist*** **by Madison P. Jones**

***Odds Aren't*** **by Matthew Lindon**

***The Recruitment*** **by Matthew Lindon**

***The Great Invasion*** **by Ethan Taylor**

## The Cyclist

*by Madison P. Jones IV*

He laid his gear out in neat little rows. Sorting and re-sorting each pressure valve, each spoon, and each tire patch kit, checking for any forgotten object that would aid tomorrow's journey. He ran his hand along the bottom tube of the frame of the bicycle. He passed his fingers along both brake cables searching for imperfections with his caress. As his fingers made their way to the back tire they stopped. He moved them back and forth, rubbing the small bump protruding from the sidewall on the rear tire. He cursed to himself while turning the quick release knob on the bicycle's dropout, removing the back tire from the frame's tight grasp. As none of the shops in the area were open, the torn tire would have to be patched, and he would have to hope it would be able to make it to the bicycle shop in Auburn. The 110.6 mile scorching back-roads ride from the college to his parent's house would take at the very least nine hours. And that was without having to stop often to rest or repair blown tubes, or worse, a completely torn tire. He did not like the thought of hitch-hiking in Alabama in the middle of the summer, and so went about patching the tire meticulously. He folded a dollar bill three times and placed it inside the torn hole in the tire; applying just the right amount of glue to secure it without making a sharp spot that the tube would pop itself on. As he waited for the glue to dry the bread machine indicated that a second loaf of bread was now ready to be added to the neat little rows of supplies. He delicately wrapped it in a cloth and placed it amongst the other materials. He then began pouring the ingredients for a third loaf into the machine's receptacle. When finished he set the timer for seven hours so that there would be a fresh loaf to eat for breakfast before the ride. Once the tire dried he replaced it on the rim, and then forced the tube in between it and the lip. He pumped the air into the tube making a strained face, begging the tube not to explode. When it had successfully reached 110 psi he unhooked the pump from the presta valve and connected it to the front tire, inflating it to exactly 115 psi. Satisfied that the back tire would not pop he began to think about going to bed. It was now eleven

o'clock; he would need to be up by five the next morning in order to budget enough time for his potential hitchhike.

He brushed his teeth hurriedly, but with purpose, in the tiny closet-sized bathroom of the converted garage he lived in. The room had a small bed and a pull out couch, for guests, the size of a twin bed. In the corner, the bathroom (also the size of the twin bed) contained a shower, toilet and sink. It was a brutal place to live during the summer, with no air conditioning. And in the winter it stunk from the kerosene heater he used, but he paid almost nothing in rent, except the occasional 12 pack or hour spent mowing the lawn. During the spring and fall he felt like he was gleaning from the entire human race.

He crossed the tiny living space, carefully stepping over the rows of equipment. He dove headfirst into bed having flicked every light off and closed all the doors. Lying very still, he attempted to slow his breathing and his excitement for sleep. He lay awake in the darkness for a long time, sweating between the sheets. Something deep in the blackest depths of his nerves never let him sleep easily before a long trip. It wasn't the fear of the ride, just some nervous energy, something inside him that would not be settled until the ride was complete. He squeezed his eyelids tight, trying to threaten himself to sleep. He could feel the sweat pooling under him and decided to roll over to the other side of the bed. Afraid to look over at the clock, he just stared at the little drips of paint that hung from the popcorn ceiling. He thought about his father, about what it would be like to shake his hand after a whole year. No reason to have been away for so long. But why now have I decided to visit? He rolled onto his stomach, closing his eyes as they passed the clock, dreading what it might say. A violent desire to sleep over took him, and he thrashed about, flinging pillows and sheets all over the tiny low roofed bedroom. Sleep like this was never handed over reasonably, it was dragged out of the black after a whole night's struggle.

He awoke disoriented by the howl of a cell phone alarm. He could not imagine that sleep had lasted more than three hours. Already the room had assumed characteristics of daylight. It was raw excitement that flung him from his bed to make breakfast. He ran to the bread maker and pulled the bread compartment

out of the machine. He juggled the hot metal container for a few seconds and then began to shake it up and down to try and fling the hot bread free of the pan. It fired out of the tin and hit the old wooden table with a slight bounce. He left the loaf to cool and harden a little while he made coffee and eggs. He performed breakfast ritualistically every morning in the tiny cramped kitchen which could only have been an afterthought in the conversion of the garage. Placing the kettle on the stove top he fell to the task of breakfast. He poured the olive oil onto the skillet, already warming on the stove top. Then he moved to the grinder, patiently breaking the coffee beans down while the oil heated for the eggs. Taking just two eggs from the fridge, he cracked them and placed the empty shells in the compost bucket. He dumped the ground coffee into the French press and poured the boiling water over it. When his breakfast was finished he laid it out on the table, arranging the spoon, fork, banana, apple, and cup of coffee around the plate with the egg. With the bamboo mats, the small potted money tree and the early yawning sun streaming in the window the breakfast was perfect. He wanted to photograph the scene, but no picture could ever demonstrate the way that this breakfast felt in the excited sleepless morning.

Eating the breakfast slowly was a difficult task. That nervous energy had nearly doubled from the night before and he could feel himself literally shaking with excitement. It was all he had within himself to slowly chew on the toast and eggs, and refrain from gulping down the hot coffee. When breakfast was finished he set the remaining dishes in the cramped sink and walked over to the dresser. Putting on his bike shorts and jersey made him more eager to get on the road. He quickly covered himself in sunscreen and loaded all of the gear into the little red plastic basket attached to the back rack of his bicycle. He had taken the basket from behind a grocery store, the back of it read "Dairy Fresh: thou shall not steal." It made him chuckle to think of the way that it looked to motorists as they angrily passed him. Having packed everything he checked his water bottles and camelback, and secured his loaves of bread, honey and spoon at the top of the basket where he could easily access them when he became hungry again. With that he carefully walked his bike out the

front door and up the gravel driveway to the road. He turned and looked back at his little garage house in the rising sunlight one last time and then pushed his feet into the straps and began to pedal.

He wore flashy round aviators with white frames when he cycled. These coupled with his Pabst Blue Ribbon jersey and spandex bike shorts made him feel like another person. His costume reflected the persona he could assume while sitting in the saddle. As the motorists passed he reveled in their stares, as if they all cheered him on. He savored each starting stroke. Feeling his muscles reawaken gave him a sort of almighty sense of power. He picked up speed and began the first of many long hill climbs of the day. His legs began to burn and he bellowed with a voracious howl that seemed to challenge the hill, the tires on his bike, the very air that surrounded him. The hot morning sun burned in him with a kind of photosynthesis. He pounded his feet against the pedals pushing harder and harder as his perception of time, of what had been, what would be, faded into the breathing sweating moment. He felt the sweat begin to mix with the sunscreen to form a runny gelatin that melted off of his body. At once the most efficient animal—the most effective machine on the planet—a modern centaur, the Übermensch. He passed the first few lazy small towns without a second glance. Already people were waking up and heading for work in their colossal metal beasts. Semis and log trucks flashed past him with a startling wind. Their shadows followed them earnestly.

He pulled over in front of a rickety gas station near what must have been the downtown of somewhere many years ago. The large pecan trees hung silently in the air as he stopped to make a sandwich. All around him were old gray wooden shacks with rustic brown aluminum roofs. He heard a dog bark anonymously from somewhere deep within the rusty wasteland. Although it was approaching eighty five degrees outside a strange dark shiver rolled over his body. The pavement around him was cracked and crumbled. In many places grass, and even small saplings had climbed out from the dead parking lot. A soft breeze stirred a sandy dust across the road. He sat down in the shade of the gas station's outcropping roof, once intended to protect drivers from the beating rain. Now it provided him a cool place

to sit and survey the comatose scenery. He lay back and felt the small rocks grind against the back of his skull. He shut his eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. After a while, he picked himself up and dusted the sandy pebbles from his hair and back. Taking the last bites of his sandwich he climbed back on the bike and continued riding.

An hour or more passed as the country side rolled on. The sprawling pastures began to disappear and the road became lined with solid trees. Except for the occasional dirt driveway and rural mailbox there was nothing to separate one moment from another. He began another long hill with heavy elevation. He battled for five minutes and let out a wailing pant as he summited. As he blasted down the hill he heard the rumble of a log truck passing by. Its shadow enveloped him as it passed. A strange black feeling overtook him as the log truck scraped by him. The slightest motion to the left would mean sudden death. The thought made him wobble a little. That was just it, with each pedal stroke he could feel life combusting in a bright flame within himself. As the wheels spun he challenged death, perfectly alive in his complete system. Intake and output. Like sex—a desire to live in the moment. The epitome of organic life, stand still and you die—the raw and pure exertion of will. Free from the grasp of the unknown—the depths of the wild darkness—riding free across the late morning sky. He felt the screaming rush of twenty plus miles per hour down a half mile straightaway drop with no helmet. As the hill bottomed out and began to gain elevation again he realized the amount of adrenaline in his body. He felt the tickle it gave him on the top of the spine as it pushed him on further and faster.

He stopped under the shade of a peculiar tall bushy tree he could not identify. He sat for a moment and rested his head on his knees and shut his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he stood up and began making another sandwich. He took his map out and realized he was only a few miles from his halfway mark: Slapout, Alabama. He wolfed down his food and jumped back on the bike, determined to make a long stop in Slapout. After about twenty minutes the town began to roll into view. It wasn't much, but compared to the cows and barbed wire fences he'd been passing

all day it seemed quite civilized. He parked his bike in front of the town grocery, an old exceptionally large gas station which had been converted some time ago. It also housed a Subway, and across the street was a Texaco station. He leaned his bike against the glass wall where he could see it and walked inside. He went to the counter and noticed that everyone in the store was staring at him. When he looked back at them, everyone went back to what they were doing. The woman stocking shelves now focused with an intensity that made her look like a great artist, hard at work on her masterpiece. He went and grabbed two Powerades and moved to the checkout line. The girl who rang up his order didn't make eye contact and blushed when he said good afternoon. When he handed her his money she looked at him awkwardly, asking him where he was coming from.

-I started out of Montevallo about five this morning. I'm about halfway done with my ride.

-Are you riding back there today?

-No, I'm headed down to Auburn to visit my folks. Only fifty more miles to go.

Her face lost its awkwardly intense stare. Her cheeks sank and then rose as a smile broke out on her face. As she handed back his change her hand quivered as it brushed his.

-You're crazy buddy.

-I guess I might be, have a nice day.

The noonday sun had finally taken hold. When he walked outside he was met with a blinding glow. He sat down on a bench in the shade, recovering from his momentary blindness. He leaned back and shut his eyes tight, savoring the delight of sitting on something larger than the bike seat. He lay there a long time and listened to the cars whisper as they occasionally passed by. Someone approached him with loud boots on. He opened his eyes to an older man staring at him in a discolored shirt. The old man smiled as he sat up and rubbed his eyes.

-You been out ridin long? Mighty hot day for a bike ride.

-Oh, it isn't bad once you get movin. Its like you have a good breeze all day, keeps you motivated. The faster you pedal, the better the breeze.

He had grey hair which was moving toward white, and a

full beard to match it. His face was tired and hardened like a tanned hide. There was a dulled glow in his eye that revealed an adventurous soul, trapped and hardened by many years in the hot Alabama sun.

-My boy used to ride like you do. One day he up and rode to California. You even kind of look like him.

-He must be real good lookin then.

-Ha ha, he was. Got killed a couple years ago in a car wreck out West.

-Gee, I'm sorry to hear about that.

They sat there for a moment in silence—not the awkward kind. It was the kind of silence where two people just understand too well to say anything. To put it to words would somehow falsify it—would make it cheap.

-How far you got left to go today?

-Well I'm about fifty miles in, so about fifty more.

-Damn, where are you goin?

-I'm headed to Auburn to visit my folks.

-Why don't you just let me give you a ride, it's gonna get over ninety degrees today, just throw your bike in my truck. I don't mind a nice car ride on my day off.

-Well I appreciate it mister, but for me it's more about the ride than the getting there.

He looked at the old man's weathered face. The man understood why he was out here, he knew what made people do things like this. For a moment he bore an uncanny resemblance to his own father.

-Well I better be getting on, nice talking to you mister.

-You too, you ride safely now. Don't get too hot.

***

He pedaled on, feeling refreshed, finally awake. As he passed the thinning houses he felt a sort of timelessness wash over him. It was as if he could just as easily have been on horseback—a hundred and fifty years ago—long before James Wilson marched after Nathan Bedford Forrest and his Confederates. You could still feel it on afternoons like this one. The stares of the Confederates and the Muscogee Indians before them never seemed to leave the landscape. What a strange

unwelcome feeling hung in the air, yet it seemed to pull him in. Lull him with every breath he took of their breaths. Made him one amongst many—who did not belong here riding in the noonday sun? He passed a large dairy cow separated from the rest of the herd by barbed wire. It was swarmed by a thick black cloud of gnats. On the back of its neck sat a large cancerous goiter. Its back was turned, but it glanced up at him as he passed. He felt sick and pedaled harder to escape his disgust. Deep within himself he always knew he would die slowly, some awful microscopic death he earned as a child—smoking cigarettes behind the high school gym with a stupid tie-die shirt and a glazy look in his eye.

As he topped the hill a young man came into view. He wore an orange vest and held a giant sign which read SLOW and presumably STOP on the other side. The man spun the sign around and he came drifting to a stop. He looked far across the crotch of the mountain to the road work going on ahead. A fancy sign read: "Pardon Our Progress—Alabama Highway Department." Those guys just couldn't stop themselves from building. If they dared not to spend their extravagant budgets they would surely face pay cuts in the future. The stink of black tarry asphalt invaded his senses. As he looked back, he could see the piles of cars lining up. As far back as he could see, nothing but grumbling compacts and ferocious log trucks. The STOP rolled into SLOW, and he began the dangerous high speed descent. He flew down the freshly lain asphalt, delighting in the sticky sound his wheels produced as they made their rotations. The cars began to hiss past him. The first log truck to pass was polite, giving enough road to allow a small comfort zone. The next one to pass did not. At full speed the truck roared behind him, blasting the horn. He swerved off the road and sunk into the muddy, freshly worked shoulder.

-FUCKING ASSHOLE!

He screamed in vain as the truck roared away. He wanted desperately to catch up with the driver. He sighed and realized that his front tire was sighing with him. He looked down as the tire stopped its noise for lack of air pressure. He angrily threw his bike over his shoulder and began to walk toward the

flattest, shadiest place he could see. He set to work removing the tube. Snakebite! Had to have hit a rock. He breathed a sigh of relief, having checked the rim and tire for damage and finding none. Every part of his body was covered in a mixture of sweat, sunscreen and road tar; making him feel like a bog person. He replaced the inner tube, and then panic overtook him. He had left the CO2 cartridges for his inflation device at his house. Tears began to well up in his eyes. He calmed himself, and slung the bike back over and began walking down the highway with his thumb in the air. He began counting the number of trucks that passed him with the cargo capacity to hold his bike. He had reached twenty five when he rounded the corner and noticed a group of men working on the side of the road. Realizing he had remembered to bring a converter cap for his bike, and could therefore use one of their air compressor tanks on his tire, he began to run at an excited speed toward the group of men.

He inquired with a frantic plea as to whether any of the workers had an air compressor he could borrow. +-They all stared at him with the same angry look that seemed to scream FAGGOT at him. He suddenly felt embarrassed of his bicycle shorts and gigantic white rimmed glasses. After a few seconds of awkward silence he walked off. He crossed the road to put distance between him and them and continued walking down the road. A long while passed as he trudged down the sweltering blacktop before a truck pulled up beside him. One of the men from the worksite was staring at him from the driver's seat of an F-350.

-Hey listen, there's a fillin station about 3 miles down this road. Hop in, I'll give you a lift.

As he lifted the bicycle into the bed of the truck he felt a sharp pain in the palm of his hand. He thought to himself about buying some gloves when he got to the bike shop. Otherwise there could soon be nerve damage done to his hand. He climbed way up into the cab of the giant truck, thanking the driver for giving him a ride.

-Man, I just couldn't stand to see you walkin down this scorchin blacktop with that bike on your back. How come you don't just walk it along side you?

-I've already set the new tube, it might mess up the tire if I let it rub the ground before it gets air in it.

-Where you comin from?

-Just south of Birmingham, I go to college there. I'm headed down to Auburn to visit my folks.

-That's a hell of a ride you set yourself up for, you think you'll make it?

-Thanks to you I just might.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Air conditioning cheered him up a little—refreshed him some. He watched as they passed the turn he should have been taking and made a note of how far he would have to backtrack. He was overwhelmed with gratitude when he noticed the air compressor attached to the building. He got out of the truck and thanked the driver for saving his trip. The driver just nodded and handed him three quarters.

-For the air pump.

He thanked him again and walked quickly toward the pump. He carefully pumped the air until it reached the maximum pressure the tank would give. He estimated it to be about 90 psi. It would have to do he thought as he eagerly set out on the one mile backtrack towards his turning point.

By now it was definitely two o'clock and the elevation had leveled into easy pedaling. Rows and rows of cotton surrounded him, as well as a small strange kind of plant he did not know. A deer ran through the rows towards him in a skeowways jerking manner. For an instant he genuinely believed that the deer would crash into him. It crossed the road less than ten yards away from him. He began to laugh out loud unexplainably—Some kind of nervous reaction. He could almost feel its bristly fur as it exploded past him. It hopped and dodged with a beautiful foxtrot and disappeared into the woods.

He rode at a casual pace for what had to have been an hour. He stopped at a crossroads with an old wooden gas station covered with cedar shingles and vines. He walked over its ancient overhang and sat down in the shade. The land around him was majestically flat, it touched him in a way few mountains had. He could see farm houses so far off in the distance that they looked like his sister's doll house she made him play with when they were kids. Virginia creeper had begun to cover the derelict building, ripping boards off—Attempting to reclaim what had

been taken from it. He felt the vines pulling him down as he closed his eyes, nearly drifting to sleep.

He sat up refreshed, ready to finish the ride. He jumped back on his bike for fear that he would be pulled all the way into the black of sleep. He completed the right turn onto the last road home and began to pedal with a fervor he was not sure could be contained. He knew that this marked the last twenty five miles of his journey. He began to pay close attention to the green mile markers that dotted the landscape, marking each mile off as he rode past.

Traffic began to pick up speed, as it was now mid-afternoon. The log trucks began their tired journeys back to trailers deep in the woods. Their shadows grew longer in the afternoon sun. The road began to narrow slightly, and the shoulder he had been riding finally disappeared completely. The truckers had less patience now than before; they had been hauling all day, making them irritable and unaware. They flew past him now, leaving little space, and no warning. This made his muscles along his neck twitch, and the hair stand up every time a truck would rush past. They didn't bother to honk anymore, each truck blocking the view of the truck behind it.

Suddenly his bicycle pointed itself hard to the right, barely allowing him enough time to realize what was happening. The log truck honked as its gargantuan tires pulled him down. The bicycle was pulled out from under him as he felt a crashing force and his body was crushed into the asphalt. He lay on the blacktop and felt himself breathe. He could not move, and he felt his eyes clouding slowly. He could feel the tiny grits of the roadway pressed deep within his skin. By and by it became his skin. Every moment seemed to hurt more than the last—but the pain seemed so distant—like the first seconds you stare into the sun. He felt the control of the carbon he had so long called his own wrenched away from his grasp by all the tiny organisms. All the tiny microbes that had lay in wait for the right moment. The long awaited bacterial uprising. He could feel his wrist twitching, or what seemed to be his wrist. But that was very far away now. The world glowed so powerfully he could make nothing out—so bright it was darkness. His eyes failed completely as he faded into the blackness, and it was not at all like going to sleep.

## Odds Aren't...

*by Matthew Lindon*

A modest white sedan pulled up to the red carpet hot on the heels of one of the typical black limousines that haunt the streets on nights like that. The shutterbugs tensed, knowing that the arrival of the white sedan meant the arrival of the actor. On that evening the actor had been nominated for best director, best screenplay, and best supporting actor. To say he was hot stuff back then was an understatement; so naturally it can be understood that when the white sedan pulled up every camera had turned to meet it and the occupant that would emerge from the vehicle's cabin. To their relief the white sedan's back door flew open and the actor emerged onto the luscious red spread.

The actor's world flooded with the staggered explosion of camera flashes and the screams of idolaters and reporters. The actor pushed through it all down the carpet. He gave the smiles the fans wanted and the answers the reporters craved. Of course he thought he was going to win, of course his next film was going to be huge, of course he loved working with Amanda (she's a really lovely person, honestly). All of it, the smiles and answers, had flown from deep within: automated responses his PR guy had conditioned into him. The actor was great at what he did; and if his performance on the screen had not guaranteed his deserving of merit, then the show on the carpet would have proven it to anyone that truly knew the man and not the actor.

He eventually made it down the carpet past the questions, screams and flashes. He was ushered to his seat for the evening. Through the night he laughed and applauded when necessary. When he won his awards (sweeping all three categories no less), he made short simple thank you speeches to those that deserved to be thanks. He shook hands with the people you have to shake hands with to continue a career in the industry. He drank his flutes of champagne. And when it came time for all the important people to file away to their after parties, the actor crawled back into his white sedan and rode home.

His first act on arrival that night was thanking his driver and relieving the man of his duties for the evening. His second act was taking his three new awards up to the roof of his house, which had been built for the purpose of large gatherings in the evening and sun bathing during the day, and placing them in a row along one of the waist high walls. His third act was returning to the first floor of the house and wandering to the liquor cabinet he kept stuffed with the best scotch, whiskey and bourbon money could buy (as well as a small assortment of gin and vodka for those who could not stand to have a real drink). After selecting an unopened thirty-seven year old bottle of some English scotch, he set to his fourth act of the night: stopping in his bedroom. In his bedroom, the actor kept an unloaded six shot revolver. He sat his bottle down on the nightstand that housed the revolver, slid the drawer open and pulled the gun out. He did not know much about guns, but he knew how to point and squeeze (the only things he felt he needed to know about them). He exhaled deeply, and reached with his other hand back into the drawer. He fished out five bullets and loaded them into the gun. His fifth act of the evening was returning to the roof: bottle in one hand, gun in the other.

The actor had been sitting in a lawn chair on the roof for years, staring out into the sky. His gun rested in his lap while the bottle, now open and over halfway consumed, was still clutched tight in his hands. It was not until she stepped in front of him that the actor realized the starlet had arrived at his home. She, of course, was still wrapped in the luscious red dress, and matching handbag, she had been wearing at the ceremony. He loved that dress; the way she looked was stunning to him, as though she was somebody completely different than the woman he had spent six months with on the set of his most recent film.

"What are you doing up here?" She asked him.

He only stared at her. Standing there in her red dress, he watched his silence creep under her skin. He wanted but could not smile. Finally the silence broke her, "Are you okay? Do I need to call an ambulance?"

He continued to do nothing but sit and stare. She shifted her weight, and he took another swig of his scotch. She looked

and saw another lawn chair that she sat down in.

Looking at him and his gun she asked, "What do you plan to do with that?"

"Shoot things," he said rather quietly, as he had not spoken in several hours that night.

"You're going to shoot them?" She asked noting the awards lined up.

"Well, I got five bullets to use."

"But that's only three targets. I guess your bottle makes four…"

"Yeah, but I got five bullets."

"In case you miss?"

"No, I'm a good shot. But I do hate leaving things on an odd number."

"I thought you were just a perfectionist; I didn't realize you were OCD."

His answer to that was another swig from the scotch bottle.

"Have you drank all that tonight?" She asked.

"Yes, I've drunk all this tonight."

"Drank, drunk, what's the difference?"

"That award in the middle," he said pointing to the best screenplay award.

"Well I'm not a writer; I'm an actress, and a damn good one."

"Then why can I tell your only pretending to give a shit?"

She looked at him for a moment; he took another swig.

"Why are you here?" He asked her.

"When you hadn't shown up to the party after a few hours, I got worried…"

"Yeah, but why are you here? I do have a phone."

"You didn't answer, that's why I came."

He took another swig almost emptying his bottle.

"You should just leave. I don't want company right now. That's why I'm here and not at some party."

"If I go, the front door will be unlocked."

"It must have already been. How else would you get up here?"

"I guess you're right," she said.

The starlet stood and stormed from the actor's range of vision. She went down to the bottom floor and found a couch. Shortly after sitting down, she heard the first shot. It was

followed quickly by two more shots. A full minute elapsed before she heard the fourth shot. She counted to herself for eleven and half seconds before she heard the fifth shot. She opened her purse, rooted around and pulled out an object the size and shape of a lipstick tube. She opened it and rattled out a doll. She replaced the tube into the purse and set the purse on a table. She put the doll under her tongue. The starlet then spread out on the couch and closed her eyes.

• • •

## The Recruitment

***by Matthew Lindon***

"She stares at me from across our small little table in the middle of this pretend-fancy dinning room.

Passersby would swear we are caught in either the most awkward loving gaze or the most intense staring competition ever. Our eyes have not moved from looking over the tops of our menus at each other in about fifteen minutes. I doubt we have blinked more than three times, which admittedly is quite a strain on our eyes.

But the simple truth is that neither of us is staring at each other. It is more of a looking through each other kind of thing. We are actually looking through the minds of the people casually dining on their enjoyable meals all around us. The reason for us sitting like this is that once we start doing our work it becomes hard to control our physical bodies. What we are doing is simply making a mental version of ourselves that, for the most part, walks around and tears open people's heads, reading their thoughts. All of this is in a completely non-literal sense. It is more like having a vast photograph album that you flip through and see bits of information. You see a man holding his car keys in front of a green corvette and this tells you he owns a green corvette. So forth and so on; you look until your heart is content. And this is all done at a speed that would make any film projector learn the meaning of the word envy.

Essentially: in the time it takes Will Smith to deliver a shitty one-liner, which will be quoted at every opportunity presented for the rest of the summer, I can know everything you know about everything you know.

You know?

Of course none of that is to imply that we are ignoring each other, she and I.

We aren't exactly friends, just merely business partners of a different sort, one that doesn't quite meet the traditional definition to a tee. So in our partnership we come to high end places like this restaurant, or perhaps it is the country club or even the yacht club (why not?), and sit as we are now: staring off into space and scouring all the information we need to completely and successfully rob all these yuppie pricks.

I'm not in this for the money, not entirely. You see, we happen to be activists, gifted activists. These aging youths around us sold their ideals and beliefs for a couple of extra zeros on their paycheck and air conditioning on their necks. It is their lack of commitment that hinders the progress of our noble cause.

This is not a Robin Hood complex by any means. This is all about vengeance, or justice (whatever), and not greed. I want to right that which is wrong.

But in a way my friend and I are the new Robin Hood. The only difference is a lack of brightly colored spandex and an overwhelming surplus of brain activity. Of course that should not imply that we are super intelligent beings of some higher order than man. Although, I will admit that through being able to read people's minds, and at the rate I am capable of doing it, that I have naturally been exposed to ideas and theorems that render your average Monday Night Wrestling viewer immobile for a couple of hours. It also works wonders for your self-esteem and ego, I must say.

That being said, should you look up my SAT or ACT scores do not be fooled by the perfect result on either of them. I was the last person finished in both of the testing groups. The reason being that I was trying to pilfer information out of everyone. I mean, why study when every test is open book? Of course, they suspected me of cheating, both times. And both times I found

myself being re-tested before a panel of 'Officially Qualified Professionals' who would relentlessly stare me down looking for me to do something suspicious. I studied for both of those re-tests, and fortunately so did the person that sat twenty feet to my right both times. Outside of those two re-tests she was a complete stranger to me, but it became obvious, and quickly at that, that we were bound to run into each other again.

That's how we made perfect scores on our SATs and ACTs twice. And who is going to accuse two people twenty feet apart of cheating, especially when neither of them looked up from their test, at least in the physical sense of the meaning that is? But like so many things, that is all in the past. Those times, for many reasons, were the last time she and I used our gift on each other.

I realize I've found about all I can use, so I send her the all done signal, (Ready?)

She relays it back, (Yeah.)

'Are you okay dear?' she asks. This is how our routine begins.

'Yeah, it's just... I don't know. I think I just want something a little more... cowboy?' A well-practiced routine that varies depending on when and where we are.

'They have a decent steak.'

'If you like them burnt to a crisp, sweetie.'

'You know I do.'

This is where I pause providing a slight look of agitation with a hint of loving frustration.

After my pause and stare win her over she says, 'Fine, we'll go somewhere else... Somewhere more cowboy.'

'Great idea,' I roll out the side of my mouth in a total Clint Eastwood as The Man With No Name style, thus concluding the little skit.

So goes our well polished routine, planned out to a perfect rhythm of normal conversation for anyone who might be listening to us speak, physically that is.

Three blocks away from the restaurant we begin our talk; our talk that nobody can or will ever hear.

(How many did you find?) I send to her.

(Not many, just two worth our time.)

(Wrong.)

(What are you talking about, I know we checked everyone and I only saw two that I figured you and I could agree on, and that weren't also previous targets. About that-)

(You didn't check the couple leaving when we came in did you?)

She doesn't respond, telling me she decided that the couple hadn't been important enough to check based on their physical appearance. She's weird like that, especially as someone who's in this for the money.

(I almost didn't, but changed my mind at the last second. I didn't get much, but what I got was good and all I need to know… out of him at least, the girl however…) I trail off baiting her into pursuing my discovery.

(Never mind her right now.)

(No. She has to be our target. Our next target. It's important. I'll send you-)

(No we need to get moving. The fact we only found two isn't good. It means we've been there too much, we've been here in this city too long, and our routine has probably caught notice, drawn some attention. We should probably move on to another city. And besides these West Coasters are too materialistic. I want something of real value. I want cold fucking cash. No more crappy paintings, or fancy lamps, or hand woven rugs, and especially no more abstract sculptures.)

(Fine, we'll move on… soon, but we need to follow up on this girl first.)

(We need to leave soon. Four couples recognized us today. Did you not notice that?)

(What?) I send back panicked.

(Yeah… One of them has seen us enough times to start putting things together that we might be the ones responsible for the sudden disappearance of their possessions along with all the other people who run in their circle's possessions.)

(Nevertheless, we're going after this girl, we can't afford not to do it.)

(What part of we need to leave do you not understand?) She's yelling at me, not the first time her stubbornness has led to her frustration has led to her humbling.

I send her the tiny bit of information I managed to learn about the girl's mind.

Her eyes widen. 'Really?' She whispers.

(Yes.) I casually send back to her as though she hadn't slipped into normal communication.

(But out of that, there's nothing to track her... and even if we did surely-)

(I said, I searched the guy she was with, remember? He gave me all we need to know in that regard.)

(But we still need to be cautious, especially now more than ever.)

(Agreed.) I say winding down yet another conversation conveniently just before we arrive back at our apartment.

I guess the place could be considered the headquarters, our base of operations. The only thing is that our headquarters seems to be constantly remodeling and relocating, but don't worry we're on that. We turn into the parking lot for it just under a minute after our conversation ends. We get up to our door, she unlocks it, opens it, slips inside. I follow her through the door, close the door, and lock the door.

(Do you think she's ever used it? Does she even know she has it? That she can use it? What it can do?) She's screaming in excitement. It's giving me a headache.

(I'm sure she has a little notion of it.) There's no way she couldn't know.

(I know that. I'm wondering if she's fully aware of it, what it is. I mean if they never got her she may not know. Other wise she's just another tagged and released like us.)

Of course, she'd bring that up. She always reverts to that story to justify her life's decisions. The perfect scores on our standardized tests, along with other people like us doing equally as impressive mental accomplishments, tipped the government off that human evolution had taken another step forward and in numbers enough to study.

(We weren't exactly tagged and released.) I say, perhaps too

defensively. Then again I was the one telling everyone that trying to escape was a bad idea, that they'd kill us all.

(Not released, no. Not willingly at least, although they didn't put up much of a fight.) She presses on.

(How could they?) How could they when the more advanced started killing those guards that were just doing their job?

(That's not the point.)

(Then what is? That we've found what we've been looking for?) Well, at least what my real job requires me to be looking for.

(What you've been looking for. I told you I'd do this for the profit and I meant it. Whatever you wanted out of this was yours.) The tone in this statement confuses me.

(So you've changed your mind about going to get her?)

(No, why would I have brought it up if I didn't want to pursue it?) She says sarcastically, telling me that the time to leave is coming momentarily.

(I don't know… I was just wondering.) I tell her, satisfying her inquisition.

(Well alright then, let's go get our prize.)

(Wait… you mean just walk up to her and demand she come with us?)

(Well, no I don't think it will be that easy.)

(I know. That's why I tried to imply sarcasm.)

(Then how would you go about it?) She asks me, as though I'm supposed to know these kinds of things. We've never dealt with this before. This is the first time we've actually found another one of us.

(I don't know.)

(Well then let's go. We'll figure it out on the way.) She says firmly.

She stands and I follow her lead.

Turning to me she asks, (Wait, do you at least know where we're going?)

(I believe so. Finding the right street might be tricky, but the general area and direction I got.)

(Good, you never mentioned whether you did or not.)

I nod, and our journey begins there by slipping out the door, locking it behind us.

From her apartment we stroll to her car in the parking lot. We get in and begin anew our conversation on the matter.

(You know, I don't recognize her. Do you?) She asks me while she starts the car.

(Well she looks at least a decade younger than us. She was probably in a different group. That is, if she was there at all.) I say as she backs out of the parking spot.

(Someone like that, if you're right, would have been there.) She says putting the car in drive.

Except this girl wasn't there. No, all the ones that had escaped are now dead. Everyone except my partner and I. That's why finding her, getting to her, is so important. I have a job to do.

(I'm sure. Turn right out of the parking lot.) I say to her.

(I don't know about this. I don't like this; maybe we should just get out of town and leave her behind. I mean, I don't think she'll come at all, not willingly at least.) She says in a shaky tone.

(It doesn't hurt to try. I mean, let's follow through on this and whatever happens happens and then we leave. Turn right in two lights, as in at the light after this next one you should turn right.)

(Fine. But since this is your plan, your discovery, you have to think of something to say.) She says, turning at the light.

(Okay, I don't know what I can say, but okay. Top the hill and take your third left.)

There's a moments pause in conversation as she continues the drive, leaving me to think. She turns and looks over at me for a brief second. She looks back to the road and I wait for her to ask what it is I'm going to say. She's so impatient. How can I think about that at a time like this?

(Well?)

(Well what?)

(What are you going to say?) She asks; I knew it wouldn't be long.

(I don't know; I'm trying to think about that.)

(Alright, but tell me whatever it is when you think of it.)

(Yeah, okay.)

I don't know what I would say to this girl. As if the two of us are going to walk up to her and say, 'hey, um, you have a really powerful gift like us... So, yeah, you should come on an

adventure with us. There'll be lots of money!'

Yeah, that would work.

But seriously, what can you say to a stranger when it comes to these kinds of things. I mean its not like I'm an angel coming to tell Jesus he's the son of God... but I can kind of see the parallels. But I'm in no way an angel. Sure I have a power some might call divine, but don't think me a savior.

And don't forget we're apparently on a schedule.

Schedule? Fuck a schedule. Nobody's after us. Nobody's been after us in years. Never again, they swore it, never again. They all learned their lesson. ... They learned they didn't have the power to stop these monsters. At least, that's what I have to make her believe.

I realize that we're about to pass our turn so I say to her, (Turn right here.)

(What are you going to say?) As though I've had adequate time to come up with an answer to this, and as though I didn't swear I would tell her as soon as I had.

(I still don't know for sure.)

Geez, she really needs to calm down. Why is she freaking out over this girl? I can't think straight. Are we even on the right street anymore? This is ridiculous. I'll just tell her the truth, its what Jesus would have done.

Jesus? Why am I thinking about Jesus?

Why am I so fucking worked up? Maybe I'm catching her nerves. Well, no, she looks calmer. Or maybe we're freaking out in some kind of anti-frequency causing the other to appear calm.

That's just lunacy.

This is all lunacy. Terrorist telepaths undermining the upper middle-class; and we're recruiting! Come one come all, norms need not apply, to a life of post-modern conquering and pillaging.

(Take this right.) I say.

This is bad. Something's wrong and she's not telling me.

She knows.

She can't know. Unless she's been lying to me. But since when? Why would she lie? There's no point. We're partners. We've always been partners. She's not in this to undermine me.

Wait, is she? Is she too, like me? Are we lying to each other?

No. No! This is just nerves. Nerves turning into paranoia.

(Are you lying to me!?!) I shout at her.

(What?) She yells back in a surprised manner.

Maybe she didn't think I'd figure it out, or maybe she really isn't lying to me.

'What's the fucking deal?' I hear myself actually scream in my confusion.

Pulling over to the side of the road, she's screaming, (Calm down! Calm the fuck down! What is wrong with you?)

Our journey has temporarily come to a complete halt at a very inconvenient time, but I still press on, (You know something I don't! Tell me! Tell me what it is!)

(I know what? What are you talking about?)

(You know the girl! You know who she is! You know something about her I don't! Tell me what's going on!)

(Are... are you serious? I don't-)

(Stop lying, you bitch!)

(Who are you talking to? Who are you talking to like that?) She yells at me. There's confidence in her voice. Unnerving.

(You're being defensive! You're hiding something! Tell me what you know!)

(All I know is that we shouldn't be doing this. We-)

(And why not? Why should we not do this?)

(We shouldn't do this because we need to get out of this city, out of this state.)

(Why are you so anxious to leave? What do you know?)

(Nothing! I don't know how I can make that any clearer!) She yells, full wits about her.

(You... you don't know anything? Anything at all?) I ask timidly, more reserved, no longer yelling.

(That's what I'm saying!) She shouts, despite my newfound reserve.

(Nothing about her at all?)

(No.) Much calmer, more appropriate in regards to my tone.

Awkward silence ensues this resolution. So many parts of our lives are spent in awkward silence.

I have to end this silence. I can't do this now. Not this time.

In my calmest voice that I can manage I ask her, (Fine. Well should we do this or not?)

(I don't know… I have a bad feeling.)

(About the girl?)

(About everything.)

(What do you mean?)

(I mean I don't think trying to recruit her is a good idea, but I don't think we can leave here without her.)

(What do you mean?)

(I don't know. I don't fucking know! What's gotten into you?)

(I… I don't know.) I say.

(Look, we both know I don't predict the future, but I'm certain we won't be able to leave town without her help.)

(So, what then? Are we going or not?)

(I think its what we have to do.)

(Alright, let's get back to work?) I try my best to hide the uncertainty in my voice, but I'm sure it crept through.

(Okay.)

And its then that she pulls back onto the road, resuming our journey.

A few minutes later we pull up in front of a modestly elegant two-story house. I wouldn't call it fancy, but its clearly better than most of the houses you'd find in this part of town.

I look at her.

She looks at me.

What I see isn't death, but it is dark and terrifying. What I see I don't like, and what she sees she must not like.

Its as though time has stopped so we can share one last moment, no matter how disturbing, together.

(So I guess it's now or not at all.) I say.

(I guess so?) Clearly, she's as terrified as I am, she must really not know what waits up the lawn… Or maybe she does.

We get out of the car and together, side by side, almost hand in hand, we start up the small, almost humble, front yard.

For the first time in my life I realize I can't recognize

the thoughts going through my mind. It's just a flood and I'm drowning. I figure it's a flood of emotions all trying to take over my exterior at the same time.

I look over at her and she's a stone, a pale stone. She's not blinking. She's emitting a wave of cold. Emitting a wave of death.

I look back up the yard, which we're half way across, at the elegant house. There's a movement behind a curtain. A sound comes from the door. We're three quarters of the way across the lawn and the door opens.

The door opens and the girl steps out to meet us.

We're in the girl's face and I feel my body stop. I can't move at all.

But, wait... I'm in the air. I'm hot. I think I'm swelling up. Something feels like it pops inside of me.

I catch a glimpse of the girl and she's smiling. I believe she's smiling at the pain I'm in.

I look over at my partner of the past few years and she too is in the air. A look of pain is on her face and then, I see her pop. She explodes before me, and I try to scream her name. But at the moment she explodes I hear, feel another internal pop causing me to make a silent agonizing grimace.

Another pop.

Another.

Then a pain in my chest spikes. I go to scream, but-"

The tape recorder cuts off and Doctor Casey looks up to General Clarke and she says, "That's all we've managed to get him to say. Every time he speaks its that story and nothing but that story. No variation, from start to finish."

"And the female?"

"She's the same, General. She tells the same story, from her viewpoint and with the different outlook on her job for us, from the same start to the same end. Both watch the other die and then experience themselves explode."

"Do they realize they're alive?"

"Without any other form of communication I cannot conclude anything other than they are stuck in a loop that may or

may not be playing out in their minds repeatedly."

"So their power is useless, and therefore they cannot fulfill their duties?"

"Until their condition changes, and I don't know if there's anything I can do to make that happen or if it ever will, yes they are of no use to this facility, General."

"The odds of them ever becoming useful again, doctor?"

"Small."

Turning to a Sergeant in the room, General Clarke says, "See to it they don't cost this facility any more time and money than that required to dispose of them and the evidence of this project."

"Yes sir."

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## The Great Invasion

***By Ethan Taylor***

When the invasion began, I thought little of it...

I woke one autumn morning to find a pair of ladybugs investigating the inlets of my bedroom windowsill. I rested my finger on the ledge and the two visitors climbed onto my hand, to continue their exploration. They seemed harmless enough—two tiny little creatures minding their own business. Little did I know, they were only scouts. Fodder sent to survey the territory and report back with their findings. Through my pleasant interaction with my guests, I unwittingly gave my consent to an all-out take-over. They probably considered me an ignorant local. In retrospect, I guess I was.

By the afternoon, the scouts returned with a half dozen others, establishing ground and developing entry and exit strategies. At this point, I grew cautious of the new inhabitants of my territory. My state had always enjoyed its isolation and freedom. An understanding would have to be met with the

outsiders, who thought they could just march in and set up camp. I resolved that if the few of them stayed within the borders of the windowsill, I would tolerate their existence. But, as with any inferior race that is shown the slightest bit of leniency, they got greedy. First blood was shed in the night, when a daring soldier wandered too close to my sleeping person. He was pulverized by a flick of my middle finger, and I rose the next morning to find that the enemy had spent the night fortifying their troops, and had declared an invasion upon my homeland. Fortunately, I had arms left over from a recently failed coup by the dirt dobbers. I thought the typically docile ladybugs would be no match for chemical warfare, so I issued a warning shot into the heart of the gathering troops. In 20 minutes, they were still. I thought that was the end. I was wrong.

Out of respect for the dead, I disposed of the casualties in the customary way, with a vacuum cleaner. My gesture went unnoticed. By the afternoon of the second day since the scouts arrived, the invaders had increased their numbers well into the double digits, and had taken new ground at the edge of the windowsill. I realized then that I was facing more than just buggy refugees seeking shelter, and would be wise to devise some defense tactics. After blasting the troops with my noxious chemicals, I fortified my bunker windows with expanding sticky sealant to deter the arrival of backup. In my naïveté, I was certain that the uprising had been quelled. I had closed my borders and executed the prisoners. I soon found that the ladybugs are a militant race, and fell victim to a ruthless invasion. Their special ops broke through my lines of corpse-riddled sticky sealant without hesitation.

I fought valiantly against the waves of my attackers. Day after day, the battle wore on. No sooner would a new battalion of troops arrive than I would wipe them out with a swift spray from my canon of fumes. I stopped any attempt at civility and left the fallen soldiers where they lay, as a warning to incoming troops, but they pressed forward undaunted. By the end of the first week, the wood of the windowsill had absorbed the chemicals. It was

soft and dripping with them. The fumes would remain for weeks to come, and the dead littered the floor and windowsill. The raids began to decrease in numbers and frequency, but by this time, I was set on total genocide. I continued to fortify my windows and obliterated any platoons that crossed their borders. I was exhausting my resources, but making progress. I pressed onward, and finally the invasion ceased.

After 48 hours of peace, I assumed victory and began reparations of my country. My Shop-Vac inhaled the corpses, by now in the hundreds. I cleaned the streaked chemicals from the window. My war-torn state resumed its peaceful function, and re-siphoned funds into commerce and education, where they belonged. Time wore on, and all seemed well.

I survived the winter on slim rations left from what I had christened The Great Extermination. Thinking I had proven my status as an impenetrable absolutist nation, I elected not to pour more money into my military. Instead, my economy functioned to serve the hungry and curious, spending money on potato chips and internet service. That was my biggest mistake of all.

Throughout the winter, the ladybugs regrouped to assess their gains and losses. Their democracy declared what had begun as an excursion a success, despite the many lives lost, because they now knew it was land worth fighting for. Their desperation for chip crumbs and safety from the hornets fueled their determination to inhabit the relative paradise upon which they had stumbled. They decided upon a new plan of attack: Blitzkrieg. They now had no need to send scouts ahead of the troops; instead, they would bide their time and rebuild troops until spring, then attack with full force and continue until victory was assured.

On March 17, the ladybugs resumed their conquest and caught me off guard. They had planned for the worst-case scenario, but marched into optimal conditions. My military was spent from the previous struggle, and my nation had resumed a

life of peace and docility. The ladybugs' second coming was no contest. By the third day, my entire bedroom had been taken, and I had no choice but to cut my losses and retreat to my spare abode to sleep on my sofa bed next to my guitars.

The ladybugs hold that ground to this day. My few allies remaining in that land report that the ladybugs have not advanced further into the house, and I am glad to hear of their tolerance of the remaining civilians. Still, this invasion is unacceptable. One day, I will return with renewed forces and take them unawares, as they did to me. I will, once again, govern a united land, and we will fear no foreign forces. The bipeds will prevail.